

What Constitutes Idolatry and What Does Not

Dr. Amartya Kumar Bhattacharya

BCE (Hons.) (Jadavpur), MTech (Civil) (IIT Kharagpur), PhD (Civil) (IIT Kharagpur),
Cert.MTERM (AIT Bangkok), CEng(I), FIE, FACCE(I), FISH, FIWRS, FIPHE, FIAH, FAE, MIGS, MIGS
- Kolkata Chapter, MIGS - Chennai Chapter, MISTE, MAHI, MISCA, MIAHS, MISTAM, MNSFMFP,
MIIBE, MICI, MIEES, MCITP, MISRS, MISRMTT, MAGGS, MCSI, MIAENG, MMBSI, MBMSM

Chairman and Managing Director,

MultiSpectra Consultants,

23, Biplabi Ambika Chakraborty Sarani,

Kolkata - 700029, West Bengal, INDIA.

E-mail: dramartyakumar@gmail.com

Website: <https://multispectraconsultants.com>

Since I was born in an ultra-orthodox Buddhist family and Lord Buddha did not believe in gods, the issue of what constitutes idolatry was always very important to me from my childhood.

As a result, the definition of idolatry was taught to me at a very early age. I went to Don Bosco School, Park Circus, Kolkata, where I saw statues of Mary and a bust of Don Bosco. I also saw a number of pictures of Jesus Christ. Yet, the Christian priests who ran the school were Roman Catholics and owed allegiance to the Pope in Rome. It was at Don Bosco that I learnt that the Pope is to be addressed as Your Holiness and the Cardinals, who occupy, collectively, a position just below the Pope in the Roman Catholic hierarchy, are to be addressed as Your Eminence. But Christians are not idolaters and are opposed to idolatry.

Many Hindus live in Kolkata as well and they are indubitably idolaters. There is a Hindu slum just near my home and it is a hotbed of Hindu fanaticism, extremism and gangsterism. There are a number of Hindu temples in the slum and each also serves as a storehouse of weapons under the very noses of the police, most of whom are also Hindus. In fact, our home was subject to attack by Hindu gangsters because we are Buddhists.

Hindu extremism is by no means limited to Kolkata. Indian government forces battled Hindu guerillas in Assam starting in the late 1970s. The Hindu guerrillas fought under the banner of AASU and AGP. Partition in 1947 had left India with a 'chicken's neck' between Nepal and what is now Bangladesh and Assam is the largest Indian state to the east of the 'chicken's neck'. At its peak, Hindu terrorists gunned down Surendra Paul of the Apeejay Group. The Hindu guerrillas were motivated by real or perceived discrimination by the Indian government towards Assam. Caught in the crossfire between the Indian government forces and the Hindu guerrillas, millions of people were rendered homeless. The turmoil continued for a few years.

Eventually, Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi signed an agreement with the Hindu leaders spearheading the guerrilla warfare. This agreement was known as the Assam Accord. Amongst other things, Rajiv Gandhi conceded the demand of the Hindu guerrillas for the establishment of

an IIT at Guwahati in Assam. Thus, IIT Guwahati became India's first 'political' IIT. This was the start of the dilution of the IIT brand, a process which is now complete with the conversion of University of Roorkee and ISM into IITs and the mushrooming of new IITs.

In the south also, a Hindu terrorist killed Rajiv Gandhi in 1991. The same Hindu terrorist group killed and caused mayhem in Sri Lanka extensively.

Coming back to the issue of idolatry, so long as a man keeps a statue or a picture of a real human being, whether deceased or living, in his home or anywhere else, he does not commit any idolatry whatsoever. For example, he may keep a statue of Lord Buddha, Jesus Christ, Mary, Asanga, or for that matter, Abraham Lincoln, in his home and most emphatically not be an idolater.

But if a man keeps and worships a statue or picture of a fictitious god or goddess, as all Hindus do, idolatry is committed. In this way, Hindus are guilty of idolatry.

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